

# Wicked' composer to write opera for Granada

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Veteran Broadway composer Stephen Schwartz, who wrote the score for the hit musical "Wicked," has agreed to create a full-scale opera to premiere at the Granada Theatre.

Opera Santa Barbara has commissioned Mr. Schwartz to write a musical adaptation of the 1964 film "Seance on a Wet Afternoon," opera company leaders said Wednesday. The company will produce the full-length work at the renovated Granada in February and March of 2009.

Mr. Schwartz will write the libretto as well as the music. His son, Scott Schwartz, will direct.

"It's a truism that you should do the things that scare you," Mr. Schwartz said in an interview. "This is exciting and very scary. I've been thinking of doing an opera -- someday -- since I was 16."

The New York City native got sidetracked, writing a series of hit musicals in the 1970s, including "Godspell" and "Pippin." More recently, he has written songs for a number of animated films, including "Pocahontas," "The Prince of Egypt" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

"I try to write melodically," he said. "I think the music will be a little bit more complex than my Broadway scores. But I'm trying not to be so intimidated by the assignment to the point where I start writing in a way that is not me."

Mark McShane's 1961 novel "Seance on a Wet Afternoon" was turned into a Hollywood film in 1964. Kim Stanley starred in the drama about a self-styled psychic who arranges a kidnapping so she can "save" the hostage and become famous in the process.

"She is a larger-than-life character -- the kind of character who sings to me," Mr. Schwartz said. "Like most people, she has a desire for recognition and attention -- a feeling that everybody else is getting their due, and why aren't I? She takes (this impulse) to such a horrifying extreme that it becomes mad, which is operatic."

The announcement is something of a surprise, in that Opera Santa Barbara is a small organization that has, up to now, strictly stuck to the standard repertory.

"We're not a commissioning company," said general director Steven Sharpe. "Generally speaking, a company our size can't take risks, unlike a larger company that may be doing eight or 10 productions a year.

"But this does not feel like a risk to us, because of the magnitude of Stephen's reputation. I think this will be a big draw for musical theater audiences from New York as well as L.A."

Opera Santa Barbara was able to commission the work thanks to "a financial commitment from a local donor," Mr. Sharpe said. The preliminary budget of creating and staging the work is around \$800,000.

"Although we're the sole commissioning agent, there's a very good chance we may end up co-producing the inaugural production with another opera company in another location in the U.S.," Mr. Sharpe said. "It will premiere in Santa Barbara and open again, six to eight months later, in this second location. That would give Stephen a little time to rework the piece if he wanted to. We're definitely considering that."

The catalyst for the project is Santa Barbara resident Michael Jackowitz, a former New York theater producer and friend of Mr. Schwartz. He recently joined forces with the Rubicon Theatre to produce the West Coast premiere of Jonathan Larson's "Tick, Tick . . . Boom!", which is moving to Los Angeles next month following its successful Ventura run.

"He called me one day literally out of the blue and said, 'I have an idea for the opening of the Granada: Stephen Schwartz wants to write an opera,' " Mr. Sharpe recalled. "I said, 'Let's talk.' "

The idea was implanted in Mr. Schwartz's mind six months earlier, in January 2005. A prominent agent took him to lunch and pitched some possible

projects, including an opera of "Seance." Mr. Schwartz, who remembered seeing the film as a youth, was "immediately struck by what a good idea it was."

"I said, 'It's really more of an opera than a musical. It's so intense and dark and moody,' " he recalled.

Last June, Mr. Schwartz and Mr. Sharpe met in New York, and decided the company and the project were "a perfect fit," Mr. Sharpe said. "It just felt right."

The opera will have an initial workshop, probably somewhere on the East Coast, in the summer of 2007. A second workshop is tentatively scheduled for the summer of 2008, perhaps in Los Angeles.

As Mr. Schwartz and Mr. Sharpe noted, the line between opera and musical theater has become increasingly blurred in recent years, with musicals like "Sweeney Todd" and "Candide" routinely performed in opera houses.

"Some of the later things I have worked on, like 'Children of Eden' and 'Wicked,' have themes that recur," Mr. Schwartz noted. "In that way, this will be more of the same.

"But it will be more through-composed. If there is dialogue, it will be underscored. At least, that is how I envision it now. I haven't written a note or a word!

"I come from a background of 'Everything has to serve the story,' " he added. "Opera's a little bit different, in that everything has to serve the music. But I'm not planning to wander off into a lovely aria or duet that has nothing to do with the story."

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